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Turkmenistan, one of the most closed societies in the world, has long been an outlier even by Central Asia's very low standards of governance. Its dismal human rights record has drawn international criticism under both the country's first president Saparmurad Niyazov (1990–2006) and his successor Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov. Turkmenistan's authorities stand accused of the frequent use of torture, disappearances of activists and journalists, and many other abuses.

Yet this resource-rich country has also punched above its weight on the global stage. Most recently, it has sought to secure a degree of international respect by assuming the 2017 chairmanship of the Energy Charter Conference, a 52-state cooperative and regulatory organization, and serving as the host of the forthcoming Fifth Asian Indoor Games. Entangled in this quest for legitimacy was Turkmenistan's 12 February 2017 presidential election. This blatantly fraud-ridden election provided a poor window on the preferences of Turkmenistani voters. It did, however, shed light on how Berdimuhammedov is striving to navigate between Niyazov's ostentatiously despotic legacy and the emerging norms of autocracy in Central Asia.

Election day offered no surprises. International observers pointed to serious irregularities, including instances of proxy voting, ballot-box stuffing, and fabrication of signatures to boost the reported turnout. Alarming but not unexpectedly, a postelection report by the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) suggests that Turkmenistan's election officials "were working with predetermined figures."<sup>1</sup>

This tampering took place despite the fact that Berdimuhammedov, the incumbent, did not need vote-fixing to win the race: He had no real challengers. The eight other

contenders were unknown mid-level bureaucrats mostly affiliated with the ruling Democratic Party of Turkmenistan (DTP), effectively the party of Berdimuhammedov. Clearly puppet candidates, they competed only in the extent of their professed admiration of the current president and his policies. While an honest count would thus have yielded a victory for Berdimuhammedov, he also evidently felt the need to improve on the 97.14 percent of votes he had supposedly received in the previous (2012) presidential election. With the help of creative counting, he took 97.69 percent of the vote on a reported 97.28 percent turnout.

A lack of competition has been a constant in Turkmenistan's politics. The long-ruling Niyazov, also known as Turkmenbashi (the head of the Turkmens), enjoyed in his time a personality cult unseen since the days of China's Chairman Mao. Golden statues were erected in his honour around the country; the biggest of them all rotated, following the arc of the sun. Niyazov renamed the months of the year to honor his relatives, and hired French contractors to build a monumental mosque whose massive golden dome featured his words of wisdom. The mosque, on the outskirts of Ashgabat, now serves as Niyazov's personal mausoleum. Turkmenbashi's works were studied in schools and universities. He was, in essence, worshipped like a deity.

Niyazov died in 2006 (reportedly from a heart attack, though the secrecy shrouding Turkmenistani politics makes it difficult to say for certain). The State Security Council designated then-Deputy Prime Minister Berdimuhammedov to take his place; and an orchestrated presidential "election"—Turkmenistan's first since 1992—confirmed his elevation in February 2007. The new president at first moved away from some of his predecessor's strangest practices. Turkmenistan's authorities again called the months of the year by their proper names. They allowed the Turkmenbashi mosque to lose its eye-paining glitter under a layer of dust blown in from the Karakum Desert, and moved the larger-than-life statue of Niyazov from the center of Ashgabat to the city's fringe. The new 312-foot

**Commented [EK1]:** Figure changed in accordance with the "Zolotoi Vek" article you link below; see also the Electoral Commission's website:  
<http://savlav.gov.tm/ru/news/125>

monument of which it forms the peak remains an attraction for the country's rare tourists, who can ride an elevator to the top for a breathtaking view of the white-marble city.

But Berdimuhammedov's commitment to a new style of governing proved fickle. In the ten years since he took office, the country's second president has gradually built up a personality cult of his own, even if it is not yet quite on par with Niyazov's.

Berdimuhammedov's portraits beckon from the walls of offices, schools, hospitals, and hotels. He smiles at passers-by from large electronic billboards at major intersections. He even greets Ashgabat residents as an immense golden rider seated on a golden horse—a dedicated statue made its appearance in 2015. State-controlled newspapers (the only kind on offer) extoll the one and only “Protector” (“Arkadag”) of the nation. Works supposedly written by the new president pile up in bookstores, and his most famous citation—“the State is for the people”—appears in every conceivable place. A local joke, invoking the control Berdimuhammedov's family enjoys over the national economy, adds: “And we even know who these ‘people’ are.”

The latest presidential election occurred at a time of economic downturn. Experts agree that the official claim of 6.2 percent growth for last year is a fabricated figure. Declining oil and gas prices have hit the budget, exhausting foreign reserves. The national currency (the manat) has been under severe pressure, a situation worsened by the country's tight restrictions on foreign exchange. There has been a shortage of basic goods, including milk, sugar, and cooking oil. In a less dictatorial country, such a record of mismanagement would be enough to see the incumbent voted out of office. In Turkmenistan, however, Berdimuhammedov's pervasive personality cult places him above censure.

Still, Berdimuhammedov's grip on power is not as strong as his predecessor's once was. Niyazov, who before his presidency had been First Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, oversaw the state's transformation from Soviet republic to independent

country. For this brutal and eccentric man, the status of national founding father proved a key reservoir of fame, stature, and legitimacy. By comparison, Berdimuhammedov's career has been that of a colorless bureaucrat. A former dentist who served as minister of health in Niyazov's cabinet, he has found it hard to fill his predecessor's shoes.

### **The Uses of Sham Democracy**

Facing a deficit of legitimacy, Berdimuhammedov has tried to remold Turkmenistan's political system to give the appearance of "competition." In 2012 the Mejlis (the rubberstamp parliament) passed a Law on Political Parties that allowed for the creation of parties other than the ruling DTP. Two such parties duly materialized: the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (PIE) in 2012 and the Agrarian Party in 2014. Deferential toward the government in every respect, these parties lack even a modicum of independence. But their existence allows the government to make the farcical claim that Turkmenistan is a "multiparty democracy."

In the recent presidential election, each of these two new parties nominated a candidate. The official figures, almost certainly fabricated, awarded 0.36 percent of the vote to PIE candidate Bekmurad Atalyev and a mere 0.06 percent to Agrarian candidate Durdygylch Orazov.<sup>2</sup> Not satisfied with running against just these two candidates, Berdimuhammedov took on six more, all supposedly "independently" nominated by so-called "initiative groups." One of them, Maksat Annanepesov, miraculously broke the 1 percent threshold. Following the elections, Berdimuhammedov magnanimously promoted this former "rival" to the directorship of the state's food industry.<sup>3</sup>

Allowing a large number of international observers to attend was another way for Turkmenistan to enhance the recent election's "democratic" bona fides. The most sizeable

observer mission came under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This group, sadly but not unexpectedly, proclaimed the elections to have been consistent with international democratic norms.<sup>4</sup> Also present were observation missions from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, observers from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation [*OK?—eds.*], and the OSCE's ODIHR assessment mission. The latter's candid and incisive report will likely never reach the eyes and ears of the Turkmenistani public.

Yet that public saw and heard a great deal about visits by international election monitors. Images of observers in suits and ties, their accreditation badges adding gravity to the occasion, were broadcast on TV in endless succession. The print media made constant references to the work of the delegations and, particularly in the case of the CIS observers, their positive comments. But for Turkmenistan's propaganda operation, it did not matter all that much what the observers said or failed to say. Their very presence allowed the regime to project a veneer of legitimacy—not so much to the world, where few were fooled in any case, as to Turkmenistan's own people.

Behind all these seemingly superfluous manipulations stands Berdimuhammedov's hope to gain recognition as a normal autocratic ruler of a normal autocratic state. Turkmenistan, after all, is hardly alone in its approach to governance. It is merely the worst in a neighborhood of repressive, corrupt, authoritarian regimes. Its neighbors include Uzbekistan, which managed to outperform Turkmenistan in the 2016 Freedom House ranking of harshest dictatorships,<sup>5</sup> and Afghanistan, whose politics have been blighted by continuous internecine violence. To the south, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with its own copious restrictions on civil liberties, offers a questionable model for still-secular Turkmenistan. Across the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan, long-serving president Ilham Aliyev (the son of the previous president Heydar Aliyev) recently appointed his wife as the country's first vice-president. And in regional heavyweight Kazakhstan, longtime ruler Nursultan Nazarbayev

won 97.75 percent of the vote (a significant 0.06 percent more than Berdimuhammedov's latest figure) in 2015 presidential elections. If Kazakhstan, currently seated on the UN Security Council, can get away with such a blatant abuse of the democratic process, what grounds are there to expect that Turkmenistan will behave otherwise? At least the months of the year have regained their traditional names. And, commendably, the golden rider on the horse does not yet rotate with the arc of the sun.

In a sense, Central Asia today is witnessing a convergence of authoritarianisms. Countries where repression has historically been at its most extreme, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are moving toward more regularized, less outlandish forms of authoritarianism. Those on the other end, such as Azerbaijan, are in turn being tempted away from their milder forms of autocracy toward the new normal. A few, like Kyrgyzstan, are still swimming against the autocratic tide—for the time being. The global slide towards authoritarianism has made the Central Asian model much less of an aberration.

In confronting these trends the West has, as usual, two main options: engagement and isolation. Engagement is not without its problems. Even acknowledging that there was an “election” in Turkmenistan in 2017 not only legitimizes the brutal regime, but taints the very word by associating it with a stage-managed vote. This plays into the hands of Turkmenistan's government, which is trying to convince its people that they live under the only kind of “democracy” that exists. But isolation is also not an option. If places like Turkmenistan are left to their own devices, the odds are stacked against any democratic shift. More likely, the country will instead move from one tyrant to the next, building golden statues and updating citations to popularize the wisdoms of the latest demigod.

So we are left with the uncertainty of careful engagement. While the trends of the times give no cause for optimism, one thing does: the rigged elections. Widespread electoral fraud is a sign of the regime's insecurities. If the turnout had to be fabricated, if the ballot

**Commented [EK2]:** Full tally taken from IFES (<http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2612/>) and Kazakhstan election commission (<http://election.gov.kz/rus/informatsiya-o-vyborakh-i-referendumakh-v-rk/informatsiya-o-proshedshikh-izbiratelnykh-kampaniyakh/itogi-vneochednykh-vyborov-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-sostoyavshikhsya-26-aprelya-2015-goda.php>)

boxes had to be stuffed, if the count had to be manipulated to reach the predetermined results, then there is more to Turkmenistani politics than meets the eye. Beneath the false narrative of popular love for Berdimuhamedov there remain kernels of resentment of his tyrannical regime. Their survival even in a harsh and repressive political environment is a testament to the unfailing, universal appeal of freedom in the face of all adversity.

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<sup>1</sup> “Turkmenistan, Presidential Election, 12 February 2017, OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report,” Warsaw, 10 May 2017, [www.osce.org/odihr/316586](http://www.osce.org/odihr/316586).

<sup>2</sup> “Ozvucheny okonchatel’nye itogi prezidentskykh vyborov v Turkmenistane” [The final results of the presidential elections in Turkmenistan are announced], *Zolotoi Vek*, 15 February 2017, [www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=12924](http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=12924).

<sup>3</sup> “Glava Turkmenii povysil v dolzhnosti sopernika po prezidentskim vyboram” [The leader of Turkmenistan promoted a rival in the presidential elections], *RIA Novosti*, 27 February 2017, <https://ria.ru/world/20170227/1488874898.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Nabliudateli SNG schitaiut vybory prezidenta Turkemnii legitimnymi” [CIS observers consider the elections for president of Turkmenistan legitimate] *RIA Novosti*, 13 February 2017, <https://ria.ru/world/20170213/1487812332.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Arch Puddington and Tyler Roylance, “Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom Under Pressure,” Freedom House, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH\\_FITW\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2016.pdf), 4.